

golden PARACHUTES

Paul Branca: Couch Crash

November 24-December 22, 2010

Vernissage: Wednesday November 24, 2010, 7-10pm

Golden Parachutes is pleased to present Couch Crash, a painting distribution project by the American artist Paul Branca.

Branca presents a series of text paintings that will be given away to his close friends in Berlin on a first come, first serve basis at the exhibition's vernissage on November 24th. What we are left with are three process-driven works resulting from the sessions' unused oil paint. They are layered over time: from the project's beginning to completion, and their diaristic function provides an honest invoicing of labour as painted document. These works will remain on view until the exhibition closes, and are available for sale.

Couch Crash continues Golden Parachute's dedication to supporting experimental approaches to artistic production, display, and dissemination and is a continuation of the gallery's interest in articulating alternative economic models for artistic exchange.

Paul Branca was born in the Bronx and received his MFA from Bard College. Couch Crash is Branca's second painting distribution project. His past works range from hand painted phone cards distributed in the public

realm in order to meet the neighbors, to paintings of his kitchen knives executed with metal paint, to be passed through airport security. Upcoming exhibitions include the group exhibition A Knot for Ariadne opening December 11th at Kavi Gupta, Berlin.

In conjunction with the exhibition Golden Parachutes will produce a limited edition series of posters featuring several of the works given away, as well as a downloadable exhibition catalog featuring essays by Tim Pierson, Jenny Borland and Jess Wilcox. The catalog will be available on Golden Parachutes' website on December 1st.

For further information and reproduction quality images, please email jesi@goldenparachutes.net or call + 49 (0) 30 86 45 22 22.

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One could maybe talk about two tendencies after the ossification of Institutional Critique: The local social contexts of collective spaces and artist's collaborations (from the anti-aesthetics of Cologne in the 90s to American Fine Arts and Orchard Gallery in New York City) and the administered social spaces of Relational Aesthetics. Both trajectories seem, for the time being, to have run their course. In the first case, the networks of practitioners of advanced art-context production have loosened in a sort of cultural diastole whose reasons for cessation are as tenuous as the conditions of its existence in the first place. (We would have to await the systole to feel comfortable with the romanticism of this designation; certainly this type of production hasn't stopped, just dispersed some). In the second case, the possibility of relation in Relational Aesthetics has shown itself to dry up as soon as the space delimited by nomination gels in its differential consistency: when the potentiality of "Any-Space-Whatever" becomes the tedium of "Every-Space: whatever."

Branca's work wants to move in the space that remains. Painting, and the production of art in general, is always a performance that is inseparable from its social field. David Joslit has written about the contemporary situation of painting as being "Beside itself."¹ For Joslit this is a condition that owes to a horizontal expansion of concerns according to which the canvas becomes a surface of interception (in some practices, production) of forces that one would deem in conventional language to be "outside" the limits of the frame, the sort of expanded cultural network in which "painting" takes place. In our secularized age of art practice and capital, the form according to which painting performs (and with respect to which it constitutes a structure) has two general terms: the local bodies (as relations between viewers and the artist-subject that are always produced) and the exigencies of artistic production. Most generally, the exigency takes the form of (or at some point owes to) a relationship between economy and ideology. In Branca's installation the exigency is the law of exchange and the discursive economy which subsumes difference by metrics of equivalence.

In spite of the impoverishment of language in the face of events and singularities, language and discourse still function as the reserve and the currency that underwrites exchange in artistic production.² This is not necessarily cause for mourning. Languages proper to their own occurrence are the only ways in which questions of value and questions in general can be dealt with. There are, however, some reifying tendencies that serve some interests more than others. The Rosetta Stone (pictured in the announcement as a type of public relations address) is the enterprising dream of infinite exchange in the service of the global market. Post-fordist operators are trained to be flexible and adaptable to any position or language; efficiency is the name of the productive game. If you want to get the idea across, you have to know the language: In this development fantasy, the hot commodity is inter-subjective relation and the gendered prize will be seduced by the frictionless economy of the pragmatic farmboy. Branca's German translations are strategically less smooth. They were produced with the clumsier (and less expensive) process of Google Translate. The text is a German variant of the English phrase "Hey guys, can I crash on a couch, I'm really tired I can't go on." The Google-German of the translation fails to render the affect of the English at the same time it bares the awkward poetics of its production. The resulting translation-

image (English text--Translation apparatus--German text) locates a loss on the level of the signified that translation would otherwise require in order to be capable of an accountable exchange between equivalents. For translation to work, it has to get the idea across. But these texts say that there isn't an idea, just discreet sets of signifiers. The excesses of Google translate (two texts marked by a degree of non-correspondence but still called translation) are the consequences of signification: meaning doesn't go down to a signified; it goes out in more material signifiers. The image formed by Branca's text paintings is less about the losses and excesses in the signifying chain than it is about refusing the dominant fantasy of a general equivalent that could subsume and regulate discreet events. Instead of producing a translation of an original as an exchange under the an ethos of aesthetic universality -- the Golden Parachutes website offers automated translations of press releases into over twenty languages to facilitate its readership's concurrence on the value of their respective shows -- the text paintings crystallize an image of the dominant economy under which painting would normally function.

The installation, however, is not the rehearsal of a semiological critique; it wants to reorganize the structure of value production. Instead of exchange in terms of equivalents and associated metrics of value, the text paintings participate in a kind of stunted barter system. Each word of the text is given away to a friend as a symbolic act of dissemination and a productive act of socialization. Value is in the production of the social. Like the translation, the work does this by dumbly insisting on the materiality of signification and its tendencies towards dissemination. The paintings are submitted to the *de jure* violence of the gallery-based dispersal; they take the status of disconnected "stuff" in the pipes that connect persons. In this function their value is displaced to the functions that they perform. The value of the process is transitory and transient. The paintings were produced to create such a displacement of value-generation and are formally constituted by the performance of their function. The tricolor palette and the physical dispersal of the objects into affinity networks (Branca's friends) index the context that the work itself has produced. The model of artistic origin and appellation has been made to go topsyturvy: naming and pointing have become a type of provenance in reverse. It's not where we come from, it's where we're going, and ostensibly we're just going to crash on our friends' couches because we can't really do anything else. It's difficult to tell if this statement is meant with irony or melancholy. Some of the most quotidian heterotopias may conclude the same way. Not being capable of going on but going on because motionlessness is not possible (like the last gasp of modernism in Beckett) is an achievement and it's unclear what other axioms of success a painting in this show could have. It may be that, as the only definite articulation, what won't go on any longer is the presence of the articulation, since the text will be disseminated by way of inaugurating the exhibition. The text, at the outset, will become progressively and finally unreadable. In this case, the task of the show is less about stating a position for painting and more about opening a space for activity.

Tim Pierson

1 October, Fall 2009, No. 130, Pages 125-134

2 Cf. "Marx and the inscription of labor" in *The Tel Quel Reader and Symbolic Economies* both by Jean-Joseph Goux.

PAUL BRANCA, LOVESICK FARM BOY

Hey jungs konnte ich über der Couch Crash, ich bin wirklich müde und kann es nicht weitergehen.

Hey guys, I could crash on the couch, I'm really tired and it can not go.

I could couch am Hey boy over that crash, I really tired and can not go on it.

Young I knew Hey over the couch crash, I am really tired and can it continue.

How does one translate a painting? If the formal structure and components of painting are coded in the universal – a surface, a material, a gesture – would it suffice to say that painting can be understood in every language? Extracting its subject matter and the space it occupies, “painting” is ultimately the same process across the board - an application of a material to a ground. Whether that procedure becomes an artwork is left up to its translation.

Paul Branca has a propensity for languages. It is not unusual for a conversation with the artist to veer into discussions of traditional recipes (in Italian) or the intricacies of 19th century painting (in French). With this linguistic aptitude comes not only a yearning for comprehension, but also for the greater possibilities of circulation — within a culture, an unfamiliar city, or a social system. Although the necessity of learning multiple tongues appears increasingly diminished in a “globalized” world, language as mastery maintains a certain economy. In Branca’s text paintings, as for the young farm boy depending on Rosetta Stone, the understanding of language can function as both a liberator and a crutch. Possibilities arise, new networks and relationships are forged, but often at the detriment of meaning. Intention is frequently led astray in the transition from idea to text, and back again.

In Branca’s work *Couch Crash*, a linguistic appeal is at stake. The artist—who claims to know very little German — offers his Berlin audience a request, one that is subject to its unplanned reception, not to mention its shaky transcription. The nineteen-panel painting contains a process of comprehension in flux: Branca’s original intent and Google-translated German results are equally ambiguous, to the point that attempting a return to English (or any other language, for that matter) further complicates or bastardizes the text’s meaning. Yet who is being spoken to? Is the phrase posed towards a specifically German viewer, in a naïvely translated solicitation from *der Amerikanische freund*? Or does the presence of English words on individual panels such as “hey,” “couch,” “crash,” insist upon the supposed universality of meaning, beyond its cultural reception? Branca — or rather his paintings — are in the course of traveling in a foreign country, asking for acceptance and a place to stay. But where does painting go to rest?

Here, it is not only the presence of language but the cues of painting that aid in the possibilities of travel, or transition. *Couch Crash* inherently positions itself in the presence of a German audience due to its wording as well as its palette. The bold red, ochre, and black of the panels is an obvious nod

to the German flag, and relies on a particular cultural reception akin to the spirit of Blinky Palermo’s renowned painting series, *To the People of New York City*. The deliberate coloration, in Palermo’s case, has certainly been interpreted as a reference to his own German background, or perhaps as a type of cultural “gift” to the artist’s adopted home in the later years of his short life, which takes on a heightened significance in the work’s permanent installation at Dia: Beacon in New York. However, Palermo’s paintings can potentially resist referential interpretation whereas Branca’s insist upon it. The presentation of “German-ness” through a color palette and the German language, from the hand of an American artist, no longer functions as an offering but as an entreaty. Like a traveler arriving in a foreign city, the paintings must rely on tactics of comprehension and compliance in order to get what they want.

Ultimately, the “couch” in question is that of circulation, and movement. It is not merely enough for Branca’s paintings to enter a gallery space and remain static on a wall. Understanding the process of commodification as well as its contextual strategies, Branca permits his work to operate within a greater network, while not losing sight of painting’s potential as object. Each panel of *Couch Crash* is meant to disseminate elsewhere, taken by friends or random visitors to an unknown environment, and uphold the capacity to function on its own, or as a catalyst. The only currency trading hands here is cultural, but further opens the possibility for Branca’s paintings to circulate in other networks of exchange — monetary included. In *Couch Crash* we can identify what David Joselit has defined as transitive painting, such that “transivity is a form of translation: when it enters into networks, the body of painting is submitted to infinite dislocations, fragmentations, and degradations.” As a means of arriving at this entry point, however, Branca acknowledges the system of codes and levels of interpretation already in place. His attempt at appealing to a German audience is built into the visual cues of the overall series, but as individual panels begin to disappear (if all goes as Branca planned) the meaning and reception of the work returns to its ambiguous beginnings, and can start anew.

Jenny Borland

WITH / BESIDE / AGAINST / OVER / UBER : RELATIONAL PAINTING

“Hey guys, can I crash over your couch? I am so tired and I cannot go on.”

To those who look inattentively or only glance Paul Branca’s words seem a clear vocalization of the weariness felt by many artists working today. Posed casually, the request suggests the intimacy of friendship and familiarity of asking. The angular and awkward lettering imitating painter’s tape, unpretentiously points to the method of its production. The intimation of humility nods to the strain of artists’ career demands. It is increasingly the norm that artists hop on a plane and fly across oceans to fulfill an exhibition opportunity, for which frequently no accommodations or travel compensation are provided.

Couch Crash plays on the common trope that art “speaks for itself”. This metaphor is often evoked in a populist sentiment that implies art can communicate on its own, independent of its presentation, its maker’s intentions, and the social historical circumstances from which it arises. Branca’s work both does and does not speak for itself. Perhaps better said, it has playfulness, openness, and generosity, which speaks to a general audience that lacks art historical knowledge AND addresses the variegated discourses of contemporary art. One may even say that *Couch Crash* uses multiple voices.

In the title phrase, “über” (in English “over”) is the key word that tips us off to the complexities of this voice. With this word in mind, the question relates to a recent essay written by David Joselit, *Painting Beside Itself*, not only for the relational connotation, but also for its approach to the legitimacy of painting in an era when the art market’s influence has exerted an unprecedented force on once semi-autonomous institutions. The art historian with strong interest in media studies rephrases the question “How does painting belong to a network?” and goes on to explain how some recent practices offer optimistic outlooks on painting.

These transitive practices have gained currency because they offer a way out of a particularly enduring critical dead end: the reification trap. As the most collectible type of art, which combines maximum prestige with maximum convenience of display (both for private and institutional collectors), painting is the medium most frequently condemned for its intimate relation to commodification.

The problem with the term “reification” is that it connotes the permanent arrest of an object’s circulation within a network: it is halted, paid for, put on a wall, or sent to storage, therefore permanently crystallizing a particular social relation. Transitive painting, on the other hand, invents forms and structures whose purpose is to demonstrate that once an object enters a network, it can never be fully stilled, but only subjected to different material states and speeds of circulation ranging from the geologically slow (cold storage) to the infinitely fast. A Poussin might land in the hands of Jutta Koether, or Stephen Prina might seize the entire oeuvre of Manet.¹

It is not coincidental to my argument that Branca studied with several of the artists who Joselit mentions (Jutta Koether, Amy Sillman, Cheney Thompson and R. H. Quaytman). These four names are just a few of the many points that Branca’s work triangulates into discussion. The oeuvres of these artists, as well as Joselit’s polemics, and recent debate about abstract painting all act as intersections of interest for Branca, in other words, the dense, composite context of the exhibition. These points converge in nodes around and radiate from concepts such as efficiency of abstraction, opacity of meaning, coded language, the value and meaning of skill, the relevance of desire, the guilt of indulgence, and the potential of failure.

What Branca’s work shares with the work of Joselit’s transitive painters is act of homage. While Koether and Prina honor painters whose legacy is well solidified in art history, Branca tributes Blinky Palermo, who has only recently gained interest from American audiences. The chromatic trio of German flag and harmonious but unsystematic color repetition of *Couch Crash* are clear references to Palermo’s own homage, the 40 panel suite, *To the people of New York City* (1976). With abstract painting now regaining prominence in New York, why then does Branca look to an obscure, silent artist?

That Palermo’s work is homage in its own right is worth noting. *To the people...* was dedicated to a heterogeneous group rather than an individual, a place where he was at once at home (artistically) and foreign (culturally). That Imi Knoebel, a long time friend of Palermo’s, also created a series of abstract paintings in his memorial, *24 Colors—for Blinky* (1977), signals two more nodes converging in a expansive nexus of exchanges, informational and material. Like other artists working in abstraction such as Dan Flavin Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Barnett Newman, Palermo dedicated many works to other artists and friends. One viewing experience, conversation, or intellectual encounter with transitive painting begets another, precipitating a sequence of influences, imitations, renditions, translations, and misapplications that Modernism attempted to deny, but have always been essential to the artistic creation. It is this spirit of homage, dedication, reverence, and tribute in Palermo’s work that Branca employs.

Branca takes transitive painting one step further than the examples set out by Joselit by visualizing the circulation of art objects in time and space as visitors to the exhibition take works off the wall and carry them home. While the artist’s explicit eschewal the market system may seem a shortsighted and naïve attempt to separate the artwork from the impurity of the market, he gives us hints this is not the case. In the same gallery Branca hangs a series of “palette cleansers”, raw canvases that exhibit traces of the making of *Couch Crash*, which he offers for sale. Here the artist situates the gifted artwork *beside* the market artwork, highlighting the relationship between them. He makes visible processes and social exchanges that already always exist behind the painting (or perhaps more specifically transitive painting). By setting up the terms of initial exchange, Branca asserts and celebrates a community structure of couch crashing and generosity that underpins artwork made at a remove from the gallery.

¹ David Joselit, “Painting Beside Itself”, in *October*, Vol. 130, Fall 2009, pp. 125-134.

As the material support of the palette cleansers provide the ground for the excess paint of *Couch Crash*, the saleable artwork supports the production of the gifted artwork — ideally.

Here's where Branca's work differs significantly from artists projects that are based on the simplistic notion of reciprocal exchange and often cite the Potlatch system as a model. Potlatch systems depend on the supposition of a closed system — they work within communities. The typical example is the tribal community — geographic and ethnically similar. Here Branca's community is that of not only like-minded people in their choice of profession, but also of similar financial precariousness — once again a nod to the working conditions of artists. However, distinct from isolated Potlatch systems, Branca's gifting remains open, one may say exposed to a larger network of actors and participants. Once set in motion, the products produced by the system will feedback onto itself, resisting control. Although the artist pairs his paintings with nice homes, it does not preclude them from one day ending up on the secondary market, paid forward to a museum, or re-gifted. Network theory reminds us that one-to-one give and take relationships rarely occur. This transitive painting knows and accepts.

One may even go as far to take *Couch Crash* as a critique of current participatory art, or what has been called relational aesthetics. Terms aside, Branca's work stands in contrast to art practices that make sweeping claims of engagement, such as "It's for everyone!" Branca's painting is a strategic positioning in opposition to, that is to say *against*, the prevailing forms of participatory art that supposedly produce socially ameliorative effects, but instead function more like entertainment. The specificity of the participants in *Couch Crash* — who is included and excluded — is an important element that distinguishes the work from homogenizing forces that threaten the agonism at the heart of healthy social-political relations. Oil paint's slow drying rate requires a time investment on the part of the artist that is antithetical to the quick pace of contemporary working conditions. In contrast to much of slapdash artwork presented in galleries these days, whether sculpture, figurative painting, or participatory work, Branca's paintings absorb time — both in the process of production and the exhibition experience. Diffuse with references to art history and pop culture and layered with double entendres, witticisms, and ambiguities Branca's work denies easy consumption.

In considering how positioning in artistic practice functions, it is important to note that "against" does not imply hostility here. Branca does not intend to parse out an either/or situation, which pits painting against participatory practices or relational aesthetics. It may be helpful to reflect on the relational language employed in the 1976 exhibition in which Blinky Palermo participated aptly titled, *Mit Neben Gegen (With Beside Against)*. If we consider mass in space (objects or subjects), a painting "against" a wall is also touching the wall. If two people bump "against" each other on the subway, it is because they are also sharing the same space, and thus also always already "with". Even if Branca's work set against certain participatory practice, it is so because it is also inherently *with* them, (sharing the field of contemporary art) and *beside* them (rubbing up against them — blurring the boundaries of painting and participation). Here, "against" is a relational term, defining not only difference but also similarity.

Both Palermo and Branca's positioning of the work toward the viewer reveal a desire for a notion of community similar to that expounded by Jean Luc Nancy; one that consists in a *being with* the other.

This is worth noting because it makes explicit that these relational words indicate convergences not only between objects but also people. Here we come full circle, or perhaps better stated — because we have surely not touched every connecting point — we return to point A, circuitously. Indeed, the other writers in this catalogue take up the same concerns but through different paths, as will attendees to the exhibition, each making sense of it individually. Yet, the work does not privilege one over the other. Each element of *Couch Crash* is simultaneously individual and connected, networked into a tangle of relationships — beside, with, and against other objects, artists, and practices, but never complete.

Jess Wilcox

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